

In September 2004, I began working as a student intern for the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless. Noreen Shawcross, the Executive Director and my field supervisor, suggested a major issue facing the homeless - transportation. I was skeptical about transportation being a major barrier for homelessness; after all, housing is really, what a homeless individual needs. I set out to discover what those individuals experiencing homelessness thought. I did this for my own benefit, I did not want to expend so much of my effort on a project not worthy and I wanted to know what the homeless clientele thought.

As part of my discovery, I spoke to those individuals experiencing homelessness in Providence and Newport . They confirmed that transportation is a barrier to accessing employment, housing, food and medical care. Feeling more assured my time would be well spent; I embraced the task and dug into the study. I spoke to the caseworkers at Crossroads and some of the providers of Homeless Shelters, who also confirmed transportation is an issue for those experiencing homelessness.

With the help of Norreen Shawcross and my research instructor from Rhode Island College, I designed a survey to measure if there is a barrier to transportation and what the effects are for those who are homeless. To guide and inform the survey, I met with two focus groups of homeless individuals in Newport and Providence.

Beginning in December 2004 and ending on February 14, 2005, with the help of my colleague Cindy Tracey, we conducted fifty-one face-to-face interviews, to complete the surveys. The survey consisted of thirteen open-ended questions, and thirteen close-ended questions. Participants staying in five different shelters around the state, WARM, Woonsocket Shelter and Harvest Shelter, Urban League and Welcome Arnold, completed the surveys.

DEMOGRAPHICS

SEX

- 37 participants were male and 14 were female.

INCOME

- 6 participants were employed.
- 13 were recipients of SSDI or TDI.
- 4 were recipients of Family Independence Program (FIP).
- 22 reported they had no income.
- 2 reported they were recipients of The Bridge Program, pending SSI.
- 4 did not respond.

AGE

Mean age 33.7 years

Median age 42

Mode age 45

Living Arrangements

45 participants reside in shelter

3 participants in the Transitional Housing Program at Crossroads

3 Other

Disabilities

11 reported mental illness

1 brain injury

1 temporarily disabled

3 medically disabled

SURVEY RESULTS

HOW DOES TRANSPORTATION AFFECT YOUR BEING HOMELESS?

- 25% said it effects them negatively because it makes going to job interviews and looking for employment harder.
- 21% said it effects them negatively because it makes being homeless harder
- 20% said having a lack of transportation made it harder to get to shelters or to meal sites.
- 18% reported they missed medical appointments, AA, or NA meetings.
- 12% replied having to walk everywhere was a hardship in cold, rainy, snowy weather with their heavy baggage.
- 4% of the responders said it had no effect at all.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN HURT WALKING TO A MEAL SITE?

- 69% of the participants reported they had not been hurt.
- 31% of the participants reported the had been hurt walking. They reported injuries such as a broken knee, fingers, and toes, while slipping on ice.

One participant slipped on ice and had to walk to the hospital to receive treatment for a contusion to their head. Another participant reported he was jumped by several individuals and was assaulted. He received six stitches on his head. One individual reported being hit by an automobile.

IF YOU EAT AT THE SOUP KITCHENS, HOW DO YOU GET THERE?

- 70% of the participants stated they walk to meal sites.
- 12% of the participants live where the meals are served
- 10% reported they take the bus if they have money and walk if they have no money, or ride a bike if they have one.
- 6% of the participants reported they do not use the soup kitchens because they cannot walk the distance to the meal site.
- 2% get rides from family and friends.

HOW DO YOU TRAVEL WHEN JOB HUNTING?

- 43% of the participants walk.
- 29% reported they are disabled and cannot work.
- 14% of the participants ride the bus when they have money and walk when they have no money.
- 8% are what I refer to as "stranded". They rely on a bus but have no money to take one.
- 2% have children and do not work.
- 3% did not respond.
- 1% said they have no decent clothes to wear to work.

HOW DO YOU GET TO MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS?

- 47% of the participants reported they walk.
- 20% reported they get a ride from friends or they get RIPTIKS from agency staff.
- 15% reported they ride a bicycle or take the bus.
- 14% said they do not see a physician because they have no medical insurance or transportation.
- 4% of the participants reported when they have money they take the RIPTA bus. When they don't have money, they walk.

HOW DO YOU FILL YOUR MEDICAL PRESCRIPTIONS?

- 37% responded they walk to the drugstore.
- 22% stated they have no medical insurance so they cannot fill their prescriptions. They also cannot get to a doctor to get a prescription.
- 14% stated they depend on a family member, friend, or others for a ride.
- 10% said they take the bus if they have money for bus fare; if they have no money, they walk.
- 4% reported they take the bus.
- 4% stated they ride a bicycle or get a ride with relatives.

- 5% did not respond.

DO YOU EVER SKIP A MEAL BECAUSE YOU COULD NOT GET TO A MEAL SITE?

- 71% reported yes.
- 24% reported no.
- 5% no response

Westerly Area Rest and Meals (WARM) Shelter and Woonsocket Shelter feed their homeless individuals on site. Not being able to eat because of transportation barriers is only an issue for those homeless people housed in shelters in Providence.

HOW DO YOU GET TO THE SHELTER AT NIGHT?

- 40% responded they take the Urban League “Goose” (bus).
- 36% reported they walk.
- 12% said they live at the shelter so it is not an issue.
- 6% stated they ask for money, get a ride, or ride a bicycle.
- 4% said they slept in burned down buildings or on the streets.
- 2% reported they live in transitional housing.

SURVEY RESULTS—CLOSED ENDED QUESTIONS

- 51% of the participants stated they are unable to eat three meals a day because they are unable to walk the distance to the meal sites.

The homeless individuals housed in WARM and the Woonsocket Shelters eat their meals on site and therefore are able to eat three meals per day.

- 62% of the participants stated they felt they were unable to locate employment due to a lack of transportation.
- 38% of the participants disagreed.

Homeless individuals in Providence feel they can get a job but cannot keep the job because they are unable to travel to the various work sites located around the state. For example, if a person is experienced at “roofing” how does he get to the various homes around the state? The opposite holds true for the participants in Westerly and Woonsocket. They believe the jobs are in Providence and they feel traveling back and forth from shelter to work, is a problem due to a lack of money for bus fares.

- 66 % of the participants said they can be hired for a job but they cannot keep it because they have no transportation to and from work. For those who work in trades, transportation is needed to get to various work sites around Rhode Island.
- 68% of the participants feel they are unable to locate housing because they have no transportation. A cross theme to the lack of transportation is having no transportation impacts if an individual can get a job which directly effects if they have money for housing.

Many of the homeless individuals may initially lack proper I.D.'s, birth certificates, etc. To replace or obtain these valuable documents, a trip to the DMV in Pawtucket or Health Department is necessary. Without transportation, proper identification, employment and housing are hard to obtain.

Conclusion

A lack of transportation is a common thread in homelessness. Individuals who are able to work, who don't have access to transportation cannot get proper Id to obtain the job they need to afford housing. If they can get a job, they may be unable to keep it due to poor access to transportation.

For individuals unable to work, not having transportation makes a difference getting to doctor's appointments and getting the necessary medication they need. This also holds true for those who are in need of Psychotropic medications.

If homelessness were a tapestry then a common strand of thread would be a lack of transportation. Being unable to get identification for a job, which you need to afford housing, affects being homeless. Spending the day just trying to keep your belly full (walking to meal sites) and your person housed, drains a person's sense of well being and leaves them with no energy to search for jobs.